

A photograph of three people sitting around a table in a modern office setting, engaged in a meeting. A man in a blue shirt is on the left, a woman in an orange top is in the middle, and an older man in a light blue shirt is on the right. They are all looking at each other and appear to be in a collaborative discussion. The background shows large windows and office furniture.

Contracting with teams using the shared outcomes model

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Contracts and contracting

Contracts underpin all relationships -- one-to-one, team, group or organisational. They contain both the conscious and unconscious agreements, the rules and procedures that guide how parties interact. Though contracts are not straightforward as complexity increases. Most of us understand the importance of a legally signed contract with the terms and conditions of the negotiation typically outlined and signed by the appropriate parties. These are usually filed until there is a problem and then taken out again to understand the intent of what was originally agreed upon.

However, it is the lens in which all parties understood the contract that add real meaning to them.

Individuals bring their own assumptions, beliefs, and expectations, most of which will be unspoken and/or unknown to the written contract and spoken agreements. These ‘hidden agendas’, the unconscious (or unseen) part of a contract, are often referred to as the “psychological contract”, which exists in all contracts. (Carroll and Gilbert, 2011)

Psychological contracts are simply unwritten agreements that may be either spoken or unspoken. They are the expectations, presumptions and assumptions that may be held by any or all parties involved in making the agreement, and can have huge impact or influence on the outcomes and interworking between people within the partnership or project.

Understanding psychological contracts is vital for successful relationships regardless of the context. All dialogue has a psychological contract and if the understanding is breached, the terms are violated and misunderstanding occurs, the same challenges arise in a legally binding contract with relationships being compromised as a result.

Both contracts revolve around:

- an “exchange” (what we will do for each other)
- a sense of “reciprocity”
- choice (I or we freely enter this arrangement)
- a sense of “predictability” (everyone involved has some guarantees of what will happen)
- a future direction (what we will do)
- defined responsibilities of parties concerned (I will be accountable for doing X if you are accountable for doing Y).

Arriving at these T&C’s, parties generally have a conversation to outline and agree before signing a contract that is binding. This conversation is called contracting. Contracting is a dialogue that establishes and sustains a relationship. Contracting is important at the beginning of a relationship to set out the initial terms of engagement i.e. it creates the “Contract” (an agreement between parties). (Turner, T., Lucas, M. and Whitaker, C., 2018)

Contracting is the most important skill for any team or group coach or leader engaging others in shared objectives and responsibilities with the intent to foster clarity around accountability.

During complex projects, team formation and to maintain overall group and team cohesion, contracting is crucial. It involves listening, questioning, clarifying and agreeing to strike a shared understanding in that moment.

Why is contracting important?

Contracting is a critical set of skills that are used throughout the relationship, which enables all parties to voice and explore issues when things become unclear or difficult.

(Turner, T., Lucas, M. and Whitaker, C., 2018)

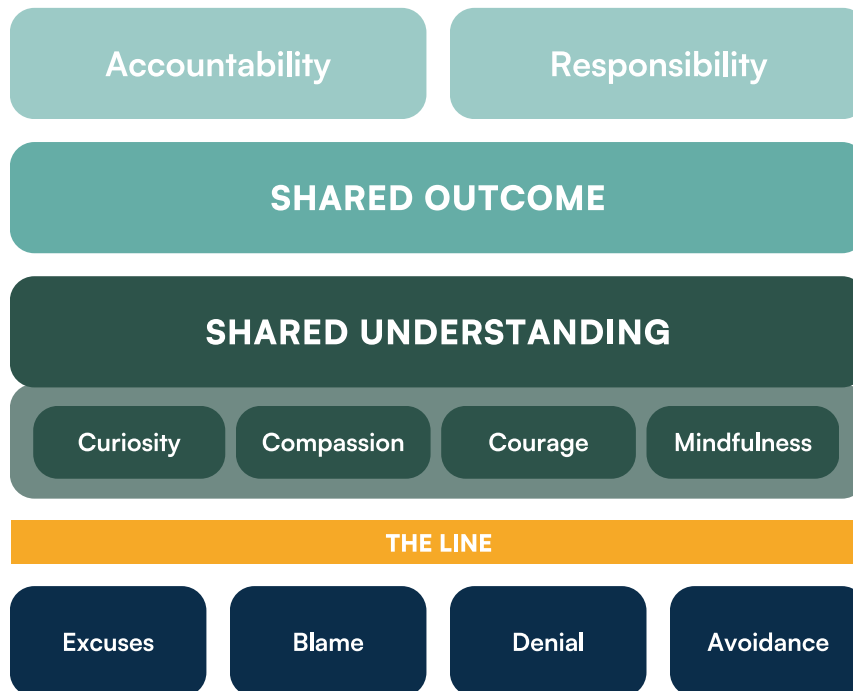
There are many reasons for contracting:

- to understand the objectives of the agreement
- to clarify roles, set guidelines and define responsibilities
- to ensure measurable outcomes
- to put assumptions on the table and discuss
- to establish some recourse if things don’t go well
- to build and set confidentiality and other boundaries
- to prevent misunderstandings and build a sustainable relationship

People understand the terms and conditions in the contract through the lens of their own assumptions, values, beliefs and expectations, which set up the paradigm of ‘how we behave’ together, known as ‘psychological contracts’. Assumptions and lack of clarity throughout time can lead to miscommunication and/or misunderstanding, creating “below the line” behaviour, as illustrated in the Shared Outcome Model (Turner, T. 2014)

Using the Shared Outcomes Model

The Contracting for Shared Outcomes Model adds value to teams in both one-to-one and multi-person situations where there needs to have shared understanding before a shared outcome can be realised. As the Shared Outcome Model highlights, the purpose of the contract is to get a shared outcome for all team members through having a shared understanding and agreement of who has Accountability and Responsibility for the Shared Outcome.



Model: Shared Outcomes (Turner, T. 2014)

In order to get to a Shared Outcome, exploring what is our collective Shared Understanding by employing “above the line” behaviours provides a productive teaming environment to make decisions from. When we’re working together seeking Shared Understanding, we experience natural sensations such as curiosity, compassion, courage and mindfulness. Conversely when team members are triggered and their beliefs or expectations are compromised, “below the line” fear-based behaviours such as Blame, Denial, Excuses and/or Avoidance emerge and can impact on the team’s interaction.

In this model, only one person is Accountable for a shared outcome — the person who has ultimate signatory, who could lose their job by it not being completed, who has the budget and the authority to extend the timeframes if they’re not met. However, anyone can be Responsible. For example, a team member is Responsible for giving accurate budget figures to their boss. The boss is Responsible for ensuring the figures provided are accurate and Accountable for the entire team’s budget being met as a result of those figures.

Agreeing Shared Outcomes

Imagine during a team meeting the team leader is angry because invoicing has not taken place this week due to not all team members having given the necessary details to finance, or logged into the company's system to enter it themselves. The team members are now justifying why this was not completed by Friday close of business, as was originally agreed. A team coach or a team member who is above the line can support the others by pausing and asking for a moment of silence. Then setting the stage to say something like "We're all in this together. Let's take a few moments to actively listen to each person share how they might resolve this for their area and by when." The coach or team member then supports them to stay focused on the task, confirming when someone offers something supportive such as "I can help you with that", limiting unhelpful comments and ensuring the team leader is included, but not overtaking the conversation.

As tensions ease and team members start concentrating on the task, there will be a shift in the dialogue as emotions gradually flow from below to above the line. Once everyone is heard and there is a commonality that most of the detail has been explored, it is then time to put all this information into a Shared Outcome. Who is going to do what by when? What happens if the deadline is not met? Who is ultimately accountable?

If at any time tensions re-arise, there is lack of clarity and/or people are losing concentration, it is for the team coach or leader to bring it back to Shared Understanding. Why are we having this conversation? What is missing? Who else needs to be included? What things do we need to explore before we agree on a Shared Outcome? This is a vital step in the discussion.

Too often we have found that teams push to outcomes when they are not shared or understood, but only on the surface agreed. This can result in scope creep, missed deadlines, time, money, not to mention reputations and/or actual jobs being lost. Simply by taking a bit of courage and time to revisit our Shared Understanding we can co-create innovative ways of solving things, new ways of decision making or including others.

Define Working Together

Spending time at the beginning of a project or initiative supports working collaboratively and having clarity around what suits all parties. Once agreed, these can also be renegotiated (spot contracted) at any time. Spot contracting is simply defined as 'in the moment' agreements. The Shared Outcome Model is a useful reference for teams who are new to contracting.

If you're new to contracting, we suggest employing a neutral internal or qualified professional team coach who can gather the team or group agreement around topics such as:

- When, where and how often will we meet?
- How will we share responsibilities such as booking meetings, keeping notes, keeping others informed on progress, etc?
- Who can keep notes and for how long?
- Will the meetings be recorded or videoed?
- Where will content be stored and who can view it?
- What are the procedures for cancelling and rescheduling meetings?

- How will we update those who are on leave or unable to attend a meeting?
- What happens if one or the other person arrives late?
- How do we measure success?
- What happens if things during a meeting/project/with a client/with each other go 'off track'?
- How does each team member like to work?
- What do they bring to team?

Thousands of coaches have been trained in the Shared Outcomes Model which they can tailor for your specific circumstances and bring their contracting expertise. They may teach the model to the team so that everyone has the opportunity to be the 'above the line' voice in the room to support others who may have dropped 'below the line' and so the model can be used in other conversations and situations where a coach may not be needed. Organisations who use the Shared Outcomes Model across teams find it soon becomes an organisational standard which increases effectiveness and limits unnecessary political posturing.

During an individual conversation

If there is a difficult conversation or a new relationship, taking the time to research and care-fully prepare before the contracting conversation takes place is recommended. For example, there may be sensitive areas that relate to the team member's personal life, health, politics, etc which are interfering with their job performance or with them fitting in with the team that need to be addressed.

Using the Shared Outcome Model, the situation is framed from an 'above the line' perspective, free of blame or excuses. Based on individual circumstances, starting with some basics around what they understand about a particular situation and sharing your perspective. Here are some general thought starters in no particular order, though we recommend using your own based on your knowledge of the person and situation to be far more powerful:

- What are you really scared of?
- What is your current understanding?
- What is your preferred outcome?
- What 'above the line' quality will you embody?
- What issues is the team concerned about?
- What is the person concerned about?
- What is important to them about this situation?
- What sort of things do they want included and/or excluded?
- What happens when things don't go their way for them?
- What do you want/expect/hope for?
- What are you willing to do to support them?
- What would they like from you?

Notice that all of the questions start with WHAT. This is a key hallmark of Shared Understanding. When you start with HOW, you are generally in Shared Outcomes territory. Once things have been adequately explored, and with the agreed Shared Understanding in mind, the parties can move to Shared Outcomes to redefine accountability, responsibility and/or ownership to suit the current reality and get back on track.

To engage contracting, you need to be clear about your perspective, take a deep breath and speak from the heart. During the contracting meeting:

- Adopt your 'above the line' quality (eg: courage)
- Engage the person around their understanding, "I'd like to begin our conversation with how we maintain momentum on this project. I noticed you've been distracted lately. What's been happening for you?"
- Listen attentively.
- Employing courage, share your understanding. "I understand you're going through a difficult time. I'm committed to the team working well together. Can we discuss what may work best for everyone before engaging the team?"
- Explore options, "I would like to propose we have an agreement around communicating before missing a deadline. Can you please share what would work for you?"
- Select who's responsible and accountable. "As the accountable person for the project, I'll send a reminder a week before. If you do not contact me with an update, it will then be your responsibility to schedule a meeting with me two days before the team meeting to discuss why."

Using open-ended questions can lead to new possibilities and ways of relating in a constructive 'above the line' way. Knowing when and how to 'spot contract' gives all parties the opportunity to more easily get back on track to the Shared Outcome, minimising risk and increasing both your success and sense of satisfaction in the engagement. If you get stuck, learning the art of contracting can be done with the support of a professional coach.

The cornerstone of teaming is psychological safety. This is fundamental in contracting, which takes a bit of courage and skill. Remaining curious, attentively listening and actively including both the individual(s) as well as yourself (you are also part of the system!) are the key elements to ensure contracting occurs and is successful. Using the Contracting for Shared Outcomes Model as a foundation when contracting leads to greater overall success and assured outcomes for organisations and their people.

References

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Biography

Tammy Turner, CEO of Turner International, is passionate about co-creating organisations of the future. Since 2001, Tammy has coached teams and groups, as well as supervised and mentored coaches enhancing their impact to the wider organisation. She has authored over 25 articles and textbooks on coaching, supervision and team coaching. She has coached over 100 teams and groups, trained, mentored and supervised internal coaches, team coaches, leaders and HR professionals. She is an ICF Master Certified Coach (MCC) and holds the EMCC Global Individual Accreditation (EIA) and Individual Team Coaching Accreditation (ITCA) at the Master Practitioner level and the EMCC Global Individual Supervision Accreditation (GISA).